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AFTER THE ORGY

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If I were asked to characterize the present state of affairs, I would describe it as 'after the orgy'. The orgy in question was the moment when modernity exploded upon us, the moment of liberation in every sphere. Political liberation, sexual liberation, liberation of the forces of production, liberation of the forces of destruction, women's liberation, children's liberation, liberation of unconscious drives, liberation of art. The assumption of all models of representation, as of all models of anti-representation. This was a total orgy an orgy of the real, the rational, the sexual, of criticism as of anti-criticism, of development as of the crisis of development. We have

pursued every avenue in the production and effective overproduction of objects, signs, messages, ideologies and satisfactions. Now everything has been liberated, the chips are down, and we find ourselves faced collectively with the big question: WHAT DO WE DO NOW THE ORGY IS OVER? Now all we can do is simulate the orgy, simulate liberation. We may pretend to carry on in the same direction, accelerating, but in reality we are accelerating in a void, because all the goals of liberation are already behind us, because what haunts and obsesses us is being thus ahead of all the results – the very availability of all the signs, all the forms, all the desires that we had been pursuing. But what can we do? This is the state of simulation, a state in which we are obliged to replay all scenarios precisely because they have all taken place already, whether actually or potentially. The state of utopia realized, of all utopias realized, wherein paradoxically we must continue to live as though they had not been. But since they have, and since we can no longer, therefore, nourish the hope of realizing them, we can only 'hyper-realize' them through interminable simulation. We live amid the interminable reproduction of ideals, phantasies, images and dreams which are now behind us, yet which we must continue to reproduce in a sort of inescapable indifference. The fact is that the revolution has well and truly happened, but not in the way we expected. Everywhere what has been liberated has been liberated so that it can enter a state of pure circulation, so that it can go into orbit. With the benefit of a little hindsight, we may say that the unavoidable goal of all liberation is to foster and provision circulatory networks. The fate of the things liberated is an incessant commutation, and these things are thus subject to increasing indeterminacy, to the principle of uncertainty. Nothing (not even God) now disappears by coming to an end, by dying. Instead, things disappear through proliferation or contamination, by becoming saturated or transparent, because of extenuation or extermination, or as a result of the epidemic of simulation, as a result of their transfer into the secondary existence of simulation. Rather than a mortal mode of disappearance, then, a fractal mode of dispersal. Nothing is truly reflected any more – whether in a mirror or in the abyssal realm (which is merely the endless reduplication of consciousness). The logic of viral dispersal in networks is no longer a logic of value; neither, therefore, is it a logic of equivalence. There is no longer any such thing as a "revolution" values – merely a circumvention or involution of values. A centripetal compulsion coexists with a decentredness of all systems, an internal metastasis or fevered endogenic virulence which creates a tendency for systems to explode beyond their own limits, to override their own logic – not in the sense of creating sheer redundancy, but in the sense of an increase in power, a fantastic potentialization whereby their own very existence is put at risk. All of which brings us back to the fate of value. Once, out of some obscure need to classify, I proposed a tripartite account of value: a natural stage (use-value), a commodity stage (exchange-value), and a structural stage (sign-value). Value thus had a natural aspect, a commodity aspect, and a structural aspect. These distinctions are formal ones, of course – reminiscent of the distinctions between the particles physicists are always coming up with. A new particle does not replace those discovered earlier: it simply joins their ranks, takes its place in a hypothetical series. So let me introduce a new particle into the microphysics of simulacra. For after the natural, commodity, and structural stages of value comes the fractal stage. The first of these stages had a natural referent, and value developed on the basis of a natural use of the world. The second was founded on a general equivalence, and value developed by reference to a logic of the

commodity. The third is governed by a code, and value develops here by reference to a set of models. At the fourth, the fractal (or viral, or radiant) stage of value, there is no point of reference at all, and value radiates in all directions, occupying all interstices, without reference to anything whatsoever, by virtue of pure contiguity. At the fractal stage there is no longer any equivalence, whether natural or general. Properly speaking there is now no law of value, merely a sort of epidemic of value, a sort of general metastasis of value, a haphazard proliferation and dispersal of value. Indeed, we should really no longer speak of 'value' at all, for this kind of propagation or chain reaction makes all valuation impossible. Once again we are put in mind of microphysics: it is as impossible to make estimations between beautiful and ugly, true and false, or good and evil, as it is simultaneously to calculate a particle's speed and position. Good is no longer the opposite of evil, nothing can now be plotted on a graph or analysed in terms of abscissas and ordinates. Just as each particle follows its own trajectory, each value or fragment of value shines for a moment in the heavens of simulation, then disappears into the void along a crooked path that only rarely happens to intersect with other such paths. This is the pattern of the fractal – and hence the current pattern of our culture. When things, signs or actions are freed from their respective ideas, concepts, essences, values, points of reference, origins and aims, they embark upon an endless process of self-reproduction. Yet things continue to function long after their ideas have disappeared, and they do so in total indifference to their own content. The paradoxical fact is that they function even better under these circumstances. Thus, for example, the idea of progress has disappeared, yet progress continues. The idea of wealth that production once connoted has disappeared, yet production itself continues more vigorously than ever. Indeed, it picks up speed precisely in proportion to its increasing indifference to its original aims. Of the political sphere one can say that the idea of politics has disappeared but that the game of politics continues in secret indifference to its own stakes. Of television, that it operates in total indifference to its own images (it would not be affected, in other words, even were mankind to disappear). Could it be that all systems, all individuals, harbour a secret urge to be rid of their ideas, of their own essences, so as to be able to proliferate everywhere, to transport themselves simultaneously to every point of the compass? In any event, the consequences of a dissociation of this kind can only be fatal. A thing which has lost its idea is like the man who has lost his shadow, and it must either fall under the sway of madness or perish. This is where the order (or rather, disorder) of metastasis begins – the rule of propagation through mere contiguity, of cancerous proliferation (even the genetic code of value having lost any force). On all sides we witness a kind of fading away of sexuality, of sexual beings, in favour of a return to the earlier (?) stage of immortal and asexual beings reproducing, like protozoa, by simple division of the One into two and the transmission of a code. Today's technological beings – machines, clones, replacement body parts – all tend towards this kind of reproduction, and little by little they are imparting the same process to those beings that are supposedly human, and sexed. The aim everywhere – not least at the leading edge of biological research – is to effect a genetic substitution of this kind, to achieve the linear and sequential reproduction, cloning or parthenogenesis of little celibate machines. When sexual liberation was the order of the day, the watchword was 'Maximize sexuality, minimize reproduction'. The dream of our present cloneloving society is just the opposite: as much .. reproduction and as little sex as possible. At

one time the body was a metaphor for the soul, then it became a metaphor for sex. Today it is no longer a metaphor for anything at all, merely the locus of metastasis, of the machine-like connections between all its processes, of an endless programming devoid of any symbolic organization or overarching purpose: the body is thus given over to the pure promiscuity of its relationship to itself – the same promiscuity that characterizes networks and integrated circuits. The possibility of metaphor is disappearing in every sphere. This is an aspect of a general tendency towards transsexuality which extends well beyond sex, affecting all disciplines as they lose their specificity and partake of a process of confusion and contagion – a viral loss of determinacy which is the prime event among all the new events that assail us. Economics becomes transeconomics, aesthetics becomes transaesthetics, sex becomes transsexuality – all converge in a transversal and universal process wherein no discourse may have a metaphorical relationship to another, because for there to be a metaphor, differential fields and distinct objects must exist. But they cannot exist where contamination is possible between any discipline and any other. Total metonymy, then – viral by definition (or lack of definition). The viral analogy is not an importation from biology, for everything is affected simultaneously and under the same terms by the virulence in question, by the chain reaction we have been discussing, by haphazard and senseless proliferation and metastasis. Perhaps our melancholy stems from this, for metaphor still had its beauty; it was aesthetic, playing as it did upon difference, and upon the illusion of difference. Today, metonymy – replacing the whole as well as the components, and occasioning a general commutability of terms – has built its house upon the dis-illusion of metaphor. Thus every individual category is subject to contamination, substitution is possible between any sphere and any other: there is a total confusion of types. Sex is no longer located in sex itself, but elsewhere – everywhere else, in fact. Politics is no longer restricted to the political sphere, but infects every sphere economics, science, art, sport ... Sport itself, meanwhile, is no longer located in sport as such, but instead in business, in sex, in politics, in the general style of performance. All these domains are affected by sport's criteria of 'excellence', effort and record-breaking, as by its childish notion of self-transcendence. Each category thus passes through a phase transition during which its essence is diluted in homeopathic doses, infinitesimal relative to the total solution, until it finally disappears, leaving a trace so small as to be indiscernible, like the 'memory of water'. AIDS is the reflection not so much of an excess of sex or sexual pleasure as of sex's decompensation through its general spread into all areas of life, its venting through all the trivial variants of sexual incantation. The real loss of immunity concerns sex as a whole, with the disappearance of sexual difference and hence of sexuality per se. It is in this diffraction of the sexual reality principle, at the fractal, micrological and non-human level, that the essential confusion of the epidemic takes hold. Perhaps we still have a memory of sex, rather as water 'remembers' molecules no matter how diluted. But that is the whole point: this is only a molecular memory, the corpuscular memory of an earlier life, and not a memory of forms or singularities (water, after all, can hardly retain the features of a face, or the colour of someone's eyes). So what we are left with is the simple imprint of a faceless sexuality infinitely watered down in a broth of politics, media and communications, and eventually manifested in the viral explosion of AIDS. The law that is imposed on us is the law of the confusion of categories. Everything is sexual. Everything is political. Everything is aesthetic. All at once. Everything has acquired a political

meaning, especially since 1968; and it is not just everyday life but also madness, language, the media, even desire, that are politicized as they enter the sphere of liberation, the sphere of mass processes. Likewise everything has become sexual, anything can be an object of desire: power, knowledge – everything is interpreted in terms of phantasies, in terms of repression, and sexual stereotypy reigns in every last corner. Likewise, too, everything is now aestheticized: politics is aestheticized in the spectacle, sex in advertising and porn, and all kinds of activity in what is conventionally referred to as culture – a sort of all-pervasive media- and advertising-led semiologization: ‘culture degree Xerox’. Each category is generalized to the greatest possible extent, so that it eventually loses all specificity and is reabsorbed by all the other categories. When everything is political, nothing is political any more, the word itself is meaningless. When everything is sexual, nothing is sexual any more, and sex loses its determinants. When everything is aesthetic, nothing is beautiful or ugly any more, and art itself disappears. This paradoxical state of affairs, which is simultaneously the complete actualization of an idea, the perfect realization of the whole tendency of modernity, and the negation of that idea and that tendency, their annihilation by virtue of their very success, by virtue of their extension beyond their own bounds – this state of affairs is epitomized by a single figure: the transpolitical, the transsexual, the transaesthetic. There is no longer an avant-garde, political, sexual or artistic, embodying a capacity for anticipation; hence the possibility of any radical critique – whether in the name of desire, of revolution, or of the liberation of forms – no longer exists. The days of that revolutionary movement are gone. The glorious march of modernity has not led to the transformation of all values, as we once dreamed it would, but instead to a dispersal and involution of value whose upshot for us is total confusion – the impossibility of apprehending any determining principle, whether of an aesthetic, a sexual or a political kind. The proletariat has not succeeded in negating itself as such – the century and a half since Marx has made that clear. The proletariat has failed to negate itself qua class and thereby abolish class society per se. Perhaps this is because the proletariat never was a class, as had been supposed – because only the bourgeoisie was a true Class, and therefore the only one capable of negating itself as such. For it has indeed negated itself, along with capital, and so generated a classless society, albeit one which has nothing to do with the classless society that was supposed to arise from a revolution and from a negation of the proletariat as such. As for the proletariat, it has simply disappeared – vanished along with the class struggle itself. There can be no doubt that had capitalism developed in accordance with its own contradictory logic, it would have been defeated by the proletariat. In an ideal sense, Marx’s analysis is still irreproachable. But Marx simply did not foresee that it would be possible for capital, in the face of the imminent threat to its existence, to transpoliticize itself, as it were: to launch itself into an orbit beyond the relations of production and political contradictions, to make itself autonomous in a free-floating, ecstatic and haphazard form, and thus to totalize the world in its own image. Capital (if it may still be so called) has barred the way of political economy and the law of value; it is in this sense that it has successfully escaped its own end. Henceforward it can function independently of its own former aims, and absolutely without reference to any aims whatsoever. The inaugural event of this mutation was undoubtedly the Great Crash of 1929; the stockmarket crisis of 1987 was merely an aftershock. Revolutionary theory also enshrined the living utopian hope that the State would wither away,

and that the political sphere would negate itself as such, in the apotheosis of a finally transparent social realm. None of this has come to pass. The political sphere has disappeared, sure enough – but so far from doing so by means of a self-transcendence into the strictly social realm, it has carried that realm into oblivion with it. We are now in the transpolitical sphere; in other words, we have reached the zero point of politics, a stage which also implies the reproduction of politics, its endless simulation. For everything that has not successfully transcended itself can only fall prey to revivals without end. So politics will never finish disappearing – nor will it allow anything else to emerge in its place. A kind of hysteresis of the political reigns. Art has likewise failed to realize the utopian aesthetic of modern times, to transcend itself and become an ideal form of life. (In earlier times, of course, art had no need of self-transcendence, no need to become a totality, for such a totality already existed – in the shape of religion.) Instead of being subsumed in a transcendent ideality, art has been dissolved within a general aestheticization of everyday life, giving way to a pure circulation of images, a transaesthetics of banality. Indeed, art took this route even before capital, for if the decisive political event was the strategic crisis of 1929, whereby capital debouched into the era of mass trans politics, the crucial moment for art was undoubtedly that of Dada and Duchamp, that moment when art, by renouncing its own aesthetic rules of the game, debouched into the transaesthetic era of the banality of the image. Nor has the promised sexual utopia materialized. This was to have consisted in the self-negation of sex as a separate activity and its self-realization as total life. The partisans of sexual liberation continue to dream this dream of desire as a totality fulfilled within each of us, masculine and feminine at once, this dream of sexuality as an assumption of desire beyond the difference between the sexes. In point of fact sexual liberation has succeeded only in helping sexuality achieve autonomy as an undifferentiated circulation of the signs of sex. Although we are certainly in transition towards a transsexual state of affairs, this has nothing to do with a revolution of life through sex – and everything to do with a confusion and promiscuity that open the door to virtual indifference (in all senses of the word) in the sexual realm. Similarly, is not the triumph of communication and information the result of the impossibility of a self-transcendence of the social relationship qua alienated relationship? Failing any such transcendence, this relationship can only reiterate itself through communication, proliferating in the proliferation of networks and submitting to the lack of differentiation that characterizes these. Communication is more social than the social itself: it is the hyperrelational, sociality overactivated by social techniques. The social, in its essence, is not this. Rather, it was a dream, a myth, a utopia, a conflicted and contradictory form, a violent form – and, certainly, an occasional and exceptional occurrence. Communication, by banalizing the interface, plunges the social into an undifferentiated state. That is why there is no such thing as a communicational utopia. To conceive of a utopian society based on communication is an impossibility, because communication results, precisely, from a society's inability to transcend itself as a function of new aims. The same goes for information: excess knowledge is dispersed arbitrarily in every direction on the surface, but commutation is the only process to which it is subject. At the interfaces, interlocutors are connected up to one another after the fashion of an electric plug in a socket. Communication 'occurs' by means of a sole instantaneous circuit, and for it to be 'good' communication it must take place fast there is no time for silence. Silence is banished from our screens; it has no place in communication.

Media images (and media texts resemble media images in every way) never fall silent: images and messages must follow one upon the other without interruption. But silence is exactly that – a blip in the circuitry, that minor catastrophe, that slip which, on television for instance, becomes highly meaningful – a break laden now with anxiety, now with jubilation, which confirms the fact that all this communication is basically nothing but a rigid script, an uninterrupted fiction designed to free us not only from the void of the television screen but equally from the void of our own mental screen, whose images we wait on with the same fascination. One day the image of a person sitting watching a television screen voided by a technicians' strike will be seen as the perfect epitome of the anthropological reality of the twentieth century.

Jean Baudrillard – After the Orgy (1990)



Foto: Sylvia John

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